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ABSTRACT

Students are clients of the educational system, but traditionally have had little voice in decisionmaking about the services they receive. Students are now demanding greater involvement, and administrators have tried a number of programs designed for student participation, generally with success. Some examples of successful programs are (1) student centers that provide a focus on students and serve to improve relations with students, (2) inclusion of students on deliberative and decisionmaking bodies to encourage greater communication and understanding between staff and students, and (3) involvement of students in producing innovative educational programs and services that better meet the needs and interests of students. (RA)

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STUDENT INVOLVEMENT

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A working paper for discussion at the Convention of
the American Association of School Administrators

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INTRODUCTION

One year ago, at the 1970 AASA Convention here in Atlantic City, it was my pleasure to present a paper on the new teenage morality. It was a plea for a new student climate within our schools. Today's discussion is an extension of that theme but with considerably more optimism. Things are happening. Not in every one of the nation's 2000 school districts, but in a great number of them good efforts and programs are in evidence. And in a good many more schools things are changing.

Many observers of the schools are still offering their critical evaluations of the deficiencies of the school systems. Some are looking for where and when and why things went wrong. Some write in anger, frustrated by the slowness of improvement. Some champion the students' concerns and latent talent. Today I merely want to cut through some of the commentary and point to three categories of student involvement that we might discuss to facilitate organization of our thoughts on the subject. The three points are:

1. Improving the Student Climate through Increased Attention to Student Development. Are we hearing what the young are saying? Is there adequate attention to the quality of student life in our schools? Are there ways to better understand the student sub-culture?
2. Including Students in the Decision Making Process. How and to what extent can students be participants in the decision process (Board, Citizen Committees, Advisory Councils, Curriculum Project Teams, etc.)? How can the decision process be used to model and teach democracy in action?
3. Incorporating Students as Producers of Educational Programs and Services. If allowed, could students be included as an extension of the differentiated staffing concept? In what areas of instruction, human relations, guidance could they contribute to more effective programming and to student development?

Impressions Gained from Nationwide Interviews

Without question, the vast majority of students are anxious for solutions to the problems of student climate and, in our judgment, they represent a tremendous resource, to date largely untapped. These impressions were gained from nationwide visitations. During the past several years it has been my privilege to interview students, parents, teachers, administrators, and community people in approximately half the states and in all sections of continental United States. The suggestions shared in this discussion grow out of approximately 1500 hours of interviewing in school districts and state departments of education.

Students we interviewed impressed us as bright, concerned, respectful, and anxious to help. There were the others too, the disruptive and trouble-bent, but they were a minority. Students want to be in on decisions, to be

given more responsibility and to show pride in their schools. Far too many though express helplessness and feel not really trusted by adults.

Improving Student Climate

Throughout the nation, school districts show great concern for running a good business operation, curriculum improvement and development, staff negotiations and staff development. We give far less consideration and show less concern for our end product, the student or educated citizen. Some very knowledgeable persons have said that most other enterprises would be out of business if they paid as little attention to their product as do the schools.

One need only review the typical board of education agenda to see that, in the past, there has been little that relates directly to student life or to the evaluation of the school's efforts in terms of what is produced. Furthermore, a review of supporting documents at board meetings or an interview with board members would have revealed that they had little input of information on students to use in arriving at their decisions. In other words, one seldom found students on the agenda, present in person or represented by information about them. This comment is not by way of minimizing the necessity for boards to deal with money matters, teacher negotiations, redistricting, etc.; but another high priority item on the list should be student life and outcomes.

A school district organization should have a unit that has student development and student life as its primary concern--responsible and accountable to the board, administration, and students for programs that focus on student life and for monitoring and interpreting student outcomes.

Again, if one looks at the organization of the typical school system, he finds units under the superintendent that reflect board agenda (that is, instruction, business, staff personnel, etc.) but seldom does he find a unit responsible and accountable for what is happening to youngsters. Granted, there are pupil services, or pupil personnel services, but these have not typically played the role of student advocate.

One major program under a student development unit would be generating student information. This is vital to decision making, and it also would show youngsters that the school is concerned about their success. Information gathering would include a follow-up of graduates and early school leavers: What is happening and has happened to our college-bound? Do they finish? How did they do? Were they well prepared? How about those who graduated but did not go on to college? Are they in some local continuing education program, in local business or industry? How about those who did not graduate? Are they employed? Have they remained in the community? Has the school done them and the community a disservice by dumping them into the economic and social life of the community, bitter and ill-prepared to contribute?

Today's students should be involved in planning such information-collecting studies, in fact involved in the collection and interpretation. Not only do they represent a major man-power resource, but how better can they

learn about their community and about economic, man-power, political, and human problems that exist within the community?

Up-to-date information is needed on our present student population, their interests, their values, their attitudes, as well as achievement and ability information. In addition to the typical demographic data, we need to know about factors which describe today's young people. How do they spend their time? How much money do they have to spend? How many have automobiles or access to them, etc.? What are their career aspirations and perceptions? How do they view work? What are their tastes in art and music? How do they manifest independence? How do they resolve conflict?

This information would be helpful, not only to the board and other central office decision makers, but also to building level administrators, to teachers, and to youngsters themselves. Youngsters have a very limited amount of information on which to compare themselves with others. They could be helped to understand themselves and the student body of which they are a part if such information were made available. Also, with information about graduates and early school leavers, their own plans and the career decisions could be more intelligently dealt with.

A Student Development Focus to Build Better Human Relations

There is a clear need to improve student-student and student-staff relationships as well as better relationships between the schools and the communities they serve. The resources are available if people are imaginative, do not demand miracles, and are patient and willing to work on their own attitudes. The belief underlying these remarks is that there is a willingness as well as a general desire on the part of teachers, administrators, parents, counselors, and students to get to work at it. Student development is, of course, a shared responsibility among many people in the schools and certainly with the parents.

Student Centers. Student development units suggested earlier to be part of the central administration should be reflected in each building. The present situation pointed out earlier regarding the absence of a student-focused unit within central offices is also reflected in our high schools. That is, throughout our schools it is easy for one to find the management center (principal's office and the school office), the centers for instruction (classrooms), teacher centers (lounges and occasionally private offices), and even curriculum centers; but it is difficult to find a student center. One might claim this observation is in error for classrooms are student centers and that all that exists in the school is for the students. Our observations did not support this. Indeed, most classrooms tend to be teacher-centered with a heavier emphasis on management and other teacher concerns than upon students.

We recommend a student development center for each school and suggest that it be located away from the administrators' offices. It should emphasize student interests and student life and reflect their values and concerns. The Center should be the locale for student government, activities and clubs, community projects, publications, planning student assemblies and forums, etc.

The Center could provide many of the present guidance functions with an emphasis on students, not on the management aspects of guidance (scheduling, filling out college forms, etc.). Although counselors' offices might be located in the Center or adjacent to it, it is hoped that counselor-student interaction would occur throughout the building and not always in the counselor's office.

Under adult supervision, students should have considerable authority and responsibility for planning, coordinating, and providing Center activities. The Center should reflect today's young people--their concerns and interests. Even the decor should be young in taste and expression.

Including Students in the Decision-Making Process

In this area a dramatic turn around has already begun. Systems are finding a variety of ways to include students in management activities. Some ask only for information or opinions from the students. Others are placing students in responsible positions.

This change has been needed. Contrary to the fears of some, it does not mean divesting responsible officials of their powers or administrative authority. It involves respectfully listening to students' ideas and, where they are valid and workable, allowing them to work. It means taking some chances with them. One of the outcomes of this change is that students are experiencing a democratic system at work. There is less reason for the young to feel alienated from the system.

One area where considerable reform is evident but where much more is called for is student government. Some administrators claim this to be a very productive area in which to initiate reform. It is one where the pay-off is great in relation to the risk and where abundant resources are at hand to do the job. Changes in student government are highly visible to students. They lead to a systematic and orderly process for identifying, researching, and facilitating changes in other areas with a minimum of disruption. Furthermore, reform in student government gets to the heart of many of our young people's concerns within the school. During our interviews we often heard students claim that they see few channels for meaningful interaction with their teachers and administrators. They report that the adults do not view them as individuals but rather feel labeled, if recognized at all, as either "good guys" or "bad guys" with the latter held in tight control and the "good" recognized but not given enough chance to have any influence. In many instances student government was seen as under too heavy control and manipulation of teachers. In many districts reformed student government is bringing about a feeling of real representation, responsiveness, access, and influence--all evidences of the best of democracy.

The student development center concept discussed earlier is emerging and in some districts (e.g., Greenwich, Connecticut) is seen as a center for student government. There, in a newly developed and highly sophisticated physical plant, students find the "Student Center" to be the "hub of Greenwich High School." The student handbook points out, "From here, students will move into areas of the building, into the Houses, the Resource Centers and their classrooms. It is to be the living room, the family room and the dining room of the school."

Another area in which major clarification and reform are being experienced relates to student's rights and responsibilities. Increasingly the student body is in on up-dating policies, and on their dissemination among the student body. The examples are manifold and to be found in all sections of the nation. Cooperatively developed statements can be obtained from many districts (Pinellas Company Florida, Montgomery Company Maryland, Dayton, Ohio to name a few.) In Hamden, Connecticut students work through their own organization, "Students for Responsible Reform."

To insure communication in Grossmont, California, time is allowed for student rap sessions as well as scheduled student-principal rap sessions. Creation of a PTSA-Parent Teacher Student Association-is another place that student opinions can be heard. In some groups full voting rights are given to student members.

In Skokie, Illinois, the Niles Township High School, after a series of twice-monthly meetings between the superintendent (Szuberla) during which student concerns were aired, the board requested that one student from each of the three high schools sit with the board at regular meetings to speak on any item on the agenda. In addition, one student from each school was chosen to serve as an ex-officio member of the board's permanent 30-member citizens' advisory council.

In Dayton, Ohio, an Assistant Director of the Pupil Personnel Department has been appointed whose responsibilities are to deal with student relations. Mr. Herbert L. Carroll, who fills that position, in a letter pointed to that community's most involved student groups: (1) City-Wide Human Relations Council, composed of students from area schools and which works under a framework of a constitution; (2) the Local High School Human Relations Council, which deals with human relation problems within their own school district; and (3) the Student Senate Advisory Forum. The Superintendent of Schools meets monthly with student representatives from each high school.

As we look to the future, areas of student involvement of more a controversial nature will be their participation on curriculum evaluation and as consultants in teacher and counselor selection. Already this is occurring. One example of the latter is in Grossmont, California, where it was reported, "One school included two students on a committee to interview candidates for two school counseling positions. In addition to the two students the interview committee included two administrators, a counselor, and a teacher. The principal was somewhat suprised at the quality of the participation of the students. The committee members were unanimous in their selection of the top four candidates."

Involving Students in Producing Educational Programs and Services

As we look at how students can be producers in the delivery of educational programs and services, we operate on two main premises. The first assumes a manpower shortage has existed-that more people delivering services to a given population can accomplish more. The second assumption is that students benefit more as they are educationally involved.

Incorporating students into programs is not a new concept. It is consistent with up-to-date ideas of differentiated staffing, and the extension of staffing through the use of para-professionals. With supervision, capable students can

handle many school tasks and free professional persons to fully use their training capabilities. Cost increases preclude hiring more and more of the same kinds of people (highly trained teachers and counselors) in an attempt to reduce teacher-pupil ratios. There is considerable evidence that student-to-student teaching and guidance is often more productive than that of teacher-to-student. This potential could be increased with supervision by professionals.

The second assumption that students benefit more deals with achievement motivation. This is one of the problems plaguing schools, or the lack of it is what bothers us. These young people have a heightened sense of conscience and a conviction that schools do not meet the needs of many. Combine that with the desire to be involved, and you have the ingredients of a tutoring program. In these the student who tutors profits as much as the child tutored. He reinforces his skill by having to teach it. He develops a sense of worth through helping someone else. It also adds an ingredient of individuality to instruction. All this tends to make the student more highly motivated.

Other areas in which students can be effective are in college counseling programs, school orientation and guidance orientation programs, and in individual work with troubled learners. Students are usually more willing to talk frankly with their peers. When allowed to work in upgrading the physical aspect of their school-redecorating, planting, painting, and patrolling-they can accomplish what tired PTA's, deans, and custodians have often failed. Dorchester County, Maryland, for example, has a high school where students did more than window-dress their school.

Viewing one sample area, Guidance, involvement may include having students develop guidance materials oriented to the student population such as handbooks, tapes and video-tapes, catalog youth resources in the school or catalog agencies of the community. Students can help the counselors explore their skills and attitudes in performing a more active student-advocate role. They can conduct continual studies on student population, graduates, and drop-outs, or they can be attendance aides, or writers of articles for the media. As student leaders they can keep counselors in touch with the student culture. The possibilities are limited only by the talent and imagination available.

Conclusion

Ideas for involving students are endless and as varied as the schools. In all these suggestions we recognize, that the administrator is not operating with students in a vacuum. There is the community from whom he has always had pressures. He still has to work with it and in it. There are the parents who at times can be as disturbing as their offspring. He (particularly superintendent and secondary principal) has one of the hardest jobs in any community. He needs all the ideas and advice he can get. Robert Ackerly, Chief Counsel, National Association of Secondary School Principals, Washington, D. C. has written a book which is available for \$1.00, geared to principals and administrators

on their duties and powers as determined by constitutional and statutory interpretation. It recommends defensible positions on 10 issues that might arise:

- (1) Freedom of Expression
- (2) Personal Appearance
- (3) Codes of Behavior
- (4) Student Property
- (5) Extra-curricular Activities
- (6) Discipline
- (7) Student Government
- (8) Student Press
- (9) Right to Petition
- (10) Drugs

I am convinced that most administrators believe in involving students in the ways discussed in this paper. We need to stop doing so much talking about what is lacking, and who is disruptive, and being so defensive. The schools image has been tarnished. As administrators it is up to you to let the public know things are happening to give the students a greater voice. That means that when you know you have a good thing going tell the press and media. If a program works in your school, some other district might adapt it to its use, but first they have to be informed.

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